

European Representations of Others

Reflecting on the “Us and Them. An Intricate History of Otherness” Exhibition and Book

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Is there anyone who does not know the Other? Is there anyone who has not been terrified by peculiar stories of the travelling Gypsies kidnapping children or Jews drinking the blood of innocent Christians? Is there anyone who has not been frightened by stories of Native Americans tearing scalps off the heads or by African tribes of cannibals? Is there anyone who has not heard of diseases transmitted by *aliens* or those brought from faraway, overseas travels – malaria, leprosy, or insanity?

Otherness terrifies. It has always terrified. For centuries, those who differed from generally accepted standards in behaviour or physique terrified the European societies and were treated as freaks, monsters, or half-animals. Otherness invoked attitudes negative up to the extreme such as condemnation, prosecution, physical and psychological violence, enslavement, and even murder.

On the other hand, Otherness also fascinates. It has always fascinated. Is there anyone who did not want to wander with Gypsies in covered wagons along the unbeaten tracks of Europe? Bake a hen in clay in forest bonfires and listen to the tune inspired by gypsy virtuoso violinists? Is there anyone who, though for a moment only, did not want to be a Native American Indian, conversant with the whisper of the wind and hunting wild buffalo? Who does not remember the genuine laughter of a child watching antics of a circus clown? Is there anyone who has not been touched by fates of Frankenstein or King Kong – awkward monsters, clumsily wanting to assimilate to the world of the omnipotent human? Who has not for once visited a room of distorting mirrors, again, to see for a moment the Other-me, a fascinating creature inhabiting a deformed body?

The Others, despite being peculiar in looks and behaviour were for centuries treated as especially fascinating and desired individuals. Curiosity that followed them was frequently accompanied by reverence. They were being painted, sketched, photographed, and exposed to the public eye – all for the crowd to laugh for a moment or forget about the mundane misery.

Those two extremes – fascination and horror – mark the spectrum of European reactions towards Otherness. In this culture, Otherness is a very com-

prehensive category and embraces a wide plethora of individuals and phenomena. Some of them were discovered by Europeans during overseas travels: the inhabitants of faraway lands, distant geographical regions, and unexplored world expanses. Others were those who lived differently, did not have their countries marked by well-defined borders, and roamed the paths of Europe, stopping here and there to get warm in the coziness of people's habitats. They were Gypsies, Old Believers, or Jews. This category also included: God's madmen, wanderers, strannik-pilgrims roaming the wilderness of the orthodox, fools, dwarfs, or giants; those deprived or excessively gifted by nature; people of the extremes – working magic, fortune-telling, or associating with the beyond; harlots, witches, harridans, and witch-doctors; sick and handicapped – physically or mentally. At present, we have new a terminology for those people: national, ethnic, and religious minorities, people who are ill, homeless, or those belonging to the dregs of society. It signifies how far the Europeans have gone in *taming* the aliens.

This exceptional theme of peculiarity and Otherness in the minds of Europeans has been tackled by the International Cultural Centre (ICC) in Krakow. The exhibition “Us and Them. An Intricate History of Otherness” was held in the institution's gallery from March 16 to June 5, 2011, and had been prepared together with the Graphics Department of the Scientific Library of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences and Polish Academy of Sciences.¹ The theme, as well as its presentation, is unique. For the ICC, challenging the Otherness has primarily arisen, as well as the institution itself, in need to open for and connect with the Others. The creators of the exhibition wanted to answer a few questions significant to Europeans – how our culture divided into “Us” and “Others,” how was the Other regarded and what features were important, what does the Other look like, who is he, and when and in what circumstances is he feared (Olszewska 2011c: 4)? The intention of the exhibition founders was also to invoke dialogue and reflection upon the theme of Others and their Otherness. It was meant to be “an attempt to get out of the ethnocentrism disease, overcome stereotypes and to take a look at oneself through a dialogue with Others” (Grodziska i Purchla 2011: 7f.; Purchla 2011: 2). And as it turned out, the attempt was successful.

The exhibition presented over a hundred artworks, mainly prints and engravings from the col-

1 Grodziska, Karolina, Barbara Górska: *My i oni. Zawila historia odmiennosci [Us and Them. An Intricate History of Otherness]*. Kraków: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 2011. 250 pp. ISBN 978-83-89273-81-9.

lection of the Scientific Library of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences and Polish Academy of Sciences. The works were divided into four sections: “The Freak,” “The Enemy,” “The Person,” and “The Hero.” Each of them consists of a series of painted or drawn representations, whose authors belonged to the most renown, as well as less known European artists, who, through various connotations and their works, reached across the world of the “Other.” The exhibition included works of the following artists: Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–1677), Martin Schongauer (1450–1491), Jacques Callot (1592–1635), Hendrik Hondius the Elder (1573–1650), and Gustav Georg Endner (1754–1824). They were accompanied by drawings of contemporary authors of comic books and films – Charles Burns, Waldemar Świerzy, and Jim Lee.

The first section of the exhibition introduced us into the world of “The Freak.” We saw monsters and *mirabilia* – two markedly distinguished categories of aliens present in Europeans’ visions ever since the Middle Ages. Various species of mythical human tribes inhabiting the distant lands on Earth and encountered during faraway travels belonged to that category. The ideas that overcome Europeans during those travels were not shaped by realism but by myth. A myth created by combining ancient literary sources, works of Christian authors, and archaic cosmographic beliefs. Ever since antiquity, literature hosted descriptions of creatures living in distant regions of the world. Some of those belonging to the category were: dogheads (cynocephali), that is people with dog’s heads (Klinger 1936: 230–232), cyclopes with eyes in the centre of their foreheads, monopods (scinopodae) advancing by means of one large foot, giants with marble bodies, shielding themselves with great ears, or creatures having a few pairs of hands sprouting from their trunks (Olszewska 2011a). These types of mythical races were said to inhabit faraway lands of the East – India, Ethiopia, Sudan, or Armenia. The ideas of alien tribes permeated into modern literature – we can find them in Christian writings, popular lives of sovereigns,² as well as in medieval and modern maps that served as directories for the great European travelers. In descriptions of Marco Polo’s, Christopher Columbus’, Ferdinand Magellan’s, or James Cook’s expeditions, the reality combined with literature created stereotypes, excited the imagina-

tion of Europeans and provided them with food for minds yearning for news and sensation. The European imagination was also being satisfied by the Renaissance’s introduction of “Cabinets of Curiosities” – the rooms full of exhibits brought from faraway travels or purchased from great travelers. They were collections of exotic masks and figures of people or animals originating in America or Africa (Pomian 2001). In the period, when colonialism was viewed critically, the exposition’s exhibits also drew attention to the way Europeans imagined and treated faraway exotic tribes that really existed. Among others, the exposition included works by Charles Philibert Lasteyrie (1759–1849) portraying Bushmen. In the period of Enlightenment they were eagerly being portrayed as their extraordinary physique served European scientists for the missing link between the world of animals and humans. The life of Sara Baartman (1789–1815), a Khoikhoi woman who came to London from South Africa in 1810 and earned money as a model on public shows, portrayed for the purpose of contemporary French scientists, is until today deemed as the most renown example of European racial segregation and colonial outlook on life (Olszewska 2011b: 64).

Paintings of Europeans discovering “strange people” made a great impression on the exhibition’s audience. They were generally created in a clear convention with a clear message: a magnificent member of the European civilisation discovers a primitive wild one. This sort of manipulation was especially visible in the engraving entitled “America” by Theodore Galle (1571–1633) quoted in postcolonial discourse and portraying Amerigo Vespucci arriving in America. Vespucci, wearing contemporary armour and accessorised with an astrolabe and in his hand a standard displaying a cross, is vividly contrasted with the indigenous inhabitants of the explored continent, naked Native Americans feeding on human flesh. There were very interesting series of exotic portraits rendered by Gustav Georg Endner (1754–1824) and made upon the example of John Webber’s drawings from distant travels with John Cook on the Pacific (Olszewska 2011b: 104–117), as well as Johann August Rossmäßler’s (1752–1783) engravings of the inhabitants of the wide world, i.e., Native Americans, Africans, Americans, and exceptional individuals on Earth, again, distinctly contrasted with the dwellers of Europe. Fascination with the nomadic tribes of the Gypsies is visible in the engravings of the French artist Jacques Callot (1592–1635), who accompanied them for some time and even shared their misery in prison.

The terms monsters and *mirabilia* were also used to illustrate fantastic and real persons with distinc-

2 Among others, such works were, e.g., a famous and popular Alexander romance, i.e., the description of life and work of Alexander the Great, full of details on mythical eastern tribes; “Christian Topography” of Cosmas Indicopleustes, and “Cosmographies” of St. Gregory Palamas, Sebastian Münster, or Giovanni Botero (see Kocój 2006: 109).

tive human-and-animal features. A section of the exhibition thus included fantastic creatures coming from faraway lands as well as those born over the centuries in various European countries and portrayed by great masters. They were often exceptional animals, as in the engraving “The Deformed Landser Sow” by Albrecht Dürer. The animal, born in 1496, in the Alsatian village of Landser, had an additional pair of hooves emerging from the back. It had only lived for a couple of hours, but its extraordinary physique and ominous words “Beware, the Lord is coming” that the swine uttered before its death, had a great influence on posterity (Szczeplik 2011: 22). Griffins, sea freaks, centaurs, or human-and-animal hybrids portrayed by contemporary masters were also included in the exhibition.

The second section of the exhibition, “The Enemy,” represented the face of the Other that mainly invoked fear and aggression. In this case, the European imagination vested them with demonic features and in the Christian society, additionally, there was a devilish aspect. The Other of this type was treacherous – often disguised as an ordinary human being – a beautiful woman, a God-fearing monk, a wild man, or satyr. Only an animal-like body part, hardly visible among the attire, signified the creature’s association with the world of demons. The exhibition included the engravings: “The Temptation of St. Anthony” and “The Temptation of Christ” by Lucas van Leyden (1494–1533), truly exceptionally displaying the demonic features of individuals pretending to be ordinary humans. That category also incorporated the notion of werewolves, depicted with a wolf’s head and a man’s body. They were to signify God’s punishment for the perpetrated evil (Olszewska 2011b: 142). The places on the demon’s side were also taken up by harlots, cocottes, and tramps – all those who, in a Christian society, distinguished themselves by not following the religious and social standards. Pursuance of demonic professions or not having a permanent address put them into the world devoid of God’s harmony.

For centuries, the enemy in Europe – notably portrayed in this section of the exhibition – was also a sick man. As duly noted by Andrzej Szczeplik (2011: 22), the normal state of a man changed with the progress of an illness and he was then inhabited by the *silent enemy*. This transformation was also accompanied by anxiety and fear, and on the part of society, the more extraordinary and stigmatising the illness was the greater the chance of exclusion. The exhibition included engravings showing various physical and mental ailments. Portraits of people enduring body illnesses – either skin problems or having additional body parts emerging from the

trunk – made a great impression. Individuals, suffering from such ailments, invoked fear and horror: how could one be protected against them if not by locking them up or excluding them from the public? This section also embraced madmen – mentally ill persons, who were regarded as public peace or political systems’ assassins. For a long time, Europeans imagined that those people possessed exceptional strength, enabling them to fool even the most stable and harmonious human minds (Foucault 1987). The engravings of Hendrik Hondius the Elder (1573–1650) were equally interesting. They were based in part of Peter Bruegel the Elder’s (1525–1569) drawing from 1564, which represented the illnesses of the nervous system, generally addressed to as “St. Vitus’ Dance.” In the drawing, the pilgrims with the ill travelled to the Church of St. John (the Baptist), the guardian of the “epileptics” located in Molenbeek around Brussels (Olszewska 2011b: 154). For a long time it was believed that the illness was caused by evil powers and demons. Within the folk circles of Central Europe, the beliefs stood strong until at least halfway through the 20th century.

In Europe, worshippers of newly created faiths or religions were also deemed to be Satan’s followers. Old or new religious factions were not welcome by the representatives of the domineering Latin Christianity. Thus, the exhibition included engravings portraying Satan sowing weeds – a metaphor of heresy, especially significant in the times of Protestantism spread and feuds arising between Catholics and Protestants. In turn, the Protestant iconography of the 15th century used similar motifs to depict enemies of the new faith: the Catholic Pope and monks who appeared as monsters with donkey’s or ram’s heads (Olszewska 2011b: 140). However, this section of the display was not entirely satisfying as the wealth of motifs stigmatising religious aliens in each of the Christian faiths of Europe is quite opulent and the exhibition could have included more examples illustrating the theme of *condemned faiths* still valid in European culture.

This section of the exhibition also revealed how Europeans coped with the fear of Otherness – exclusion from the society was not only based on naming them as such, but they were also locked up in culturally meaningful places (hospitals, prisons, or madhouses). It is a pity that the exhibition lacked one of the most distinguished European themes/motifs corresponding to the world of madmen, the famous *Narrenschiffe*, ships full of the insane, traveling from one port to another, but never docking at one. Thus, the whole crew of the ships of fools spent their entire lives on the waters, sailing among ports. Other images in this section brilliantly represented

a different way of exclusion – the political satire. Political or religious opponents were being depreciated and ridiculed by presenting them as physically deformed with additional – generally animal-like – body parts. This type of operation had been employed on the engraving of Romeyn de Hooghe (1645–1708), portraying King James II of England, who favoured the Catholics, as riding a donkey, and a Jesuit – his confessor – as a lobster (Olszewska 2011c: 4). This type of branding is still valid today and can easily be identified in caricatures of politicians or graffiti works of football fans.

The section “The Person” allows a closer look at the physiognomy of certain Others. The visions of Others presented in this section of the exhibition were based on the science of physiognomy that had been developing since the antiquity and its standard rule saying that there is a special relation between the outer look of a human being and his individual character. Comparing the appearance of people to the appearance of animals helped to organise types and characters and to attribute distinctive features of animals to humans. According to the scientists of physiognomy, the features of human characters were to be reflected in the form of their face and shape of the skull. The disharmony of proportions was to signify bad character. Similarities to mythical persons, creatures, and animals were to help identify the character of an individual (Olszewska 2011b: 184).

The exhibition presented excellent portraits painted according to the “Grotesque Heads” of Leonardo da Vinci. Those sketches portrayed people who were strange and disfigured and parts of their faces were deformed (extra-large features, broken noses, pointed and extended chins, and foreheads that were too high or too low). Until today, we do not know, why in Renaissance – the age that loved the harmonious form of the human body and its parts – the master chose to complete this extraordinary study of human deficiency and ugliness. It was possibly the reason for a new fashion in the European culture to emerge: a fashion to paint portraits and engravings of villains, satyrs, criminals, and peace assassins – presented with all the conceivable deformations.

The spectator often was able to become familiarised with authentic historical persons, dwarfs or giants, the toys of the old courts. An anonymous work from the 18th century presented a real individual, Jakub Ries, a Czech dwarf with Jewish origins who advised Emperor Charles VI at court in Vienna. Another work by Francisco Muntaner (1743–1805) portrayed El Primo, a dwarf that served in the Spanish court of King Philipp IV. The images of giants

also attracted attention, for example, Bernard Gigli, a giant in the 18th century, who performed for money all over Europe, including Warsaw. Only the image of the Russian Tsar Peter I, portrayed by Joseph Wagner (1706–1780), whose height of over two metres was said to be shocking to his contemporaries, seemed a little out of place in this context.

This section of the exhibition included engravings of Omai, a South Sea Islander from the island of Ulitea (presently Raiatea) who has been brought to England by the expedition of Captain James Cook in 1773. Portrayed by Sir Joshua Reynolds he embodied ethnographic engravings and genuine portraits of noble savages that have long been the subject of European philosophers’ philosophical speculations (Olszewska 2011b: 228).

In the fourth section of the exhibition titled “The Hero,” the representatives of mythical races came back as superheroes in the contemporary mass culture. They are especially abundant in the world of film or comic books. Dracula, Batman, Superman, and the circus performers signify how little has changed over the centuries – the culture uses the same motifs and symbols copied by new characters of mass imagination. They not only come from faraway, mythical lands of the other world, but also possess a changed body, a body that reminds Europeans of the Others they have known for centuries: “What we have in ‘Star Wars’ and ‘Detective Comics’ is somehow related to the idea of mythical races described by Pliny the Elder that were included in medieval encyclopaedias. To be honest, those half-mythical lands are no longer the extremes of Asia or Africa – this time they are planets you can reach by travelling in spaceships. But the idea stays the same. The character of Chewbacca from ‘Star Wars’ reminds of the savage men engraved by Schongauer and Dürer, or lion people living on the European courts of the 16th century.”³

The exhibition was accompanied by an extensive selection of events continuing the themes presented in the expositions. Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, a Romani from Poland, talked about the identity of contemporary Gypsies as well as what it means to be the Other in Poland. Michal Mencfeld introduced us into the secrets of monsters from the cabinets of curiosities, i.e., prototypes of modern-day European museums. The old motif of Dracula and the vampire symbols in contemporary film, themes especially important for teenagers these days, was discussed by Anna Taszycka. Andrzej Pienkos reminded of the European discoveries of “savages”

3 Omai returned to Tahiti with J. Cook in 1777; see Olszewska (2011a).

and James Cook's expeditions to search for exotic land and people. There were additional workshops, lessons in the gallery, or interactive tours prepared for children, young people, and university students. The exhibition was concluded by a great concert "Geniuses and Eccentrics" that included works of the eccentric Others – music composers.

However, a great cultural industry generally thriving in such events – a well-prepared film festival – was missing. Only two films, "The Elephant Man" by David Lynch and "The Dybbuk" by Michał Waszyński, were presented as part of associated events. It makes one want to sit down at the exhibition and remember all the film masterpieces that involved the theme of Otherness.

One purpose of the exhibition in Krakow was to confront the Otherness of people living in the area of a borderland. Central Europe, in the mind of a European, is an agreed point, where the widely understood category of Eastern expanse meets the West. Here, a neighbour or Other does not always mean a friend. Here, through times of totalitarian regimes, borders always incited tension and conflicts. Here, the memory of the wrong is still vivid and harm inflicted on the – physically, ethnically, national, or religious – Others is not entirely healed. Let us hope that this type of initiatives help them heal faster. The exhibition, as every other stereotype, showed not who the Others really are, but who the Europeans were and still are, what their ideas and attitudes are, who they were afraid of, who they were fascinated by and whom, from their own, they persecuted.

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Entretien avec Monique Sicard

Monique Sicard

1. Comment voyez-vous la situation actuelle en philosophie et en sciences sociales ? A quoi sont dues, à votre avis, les tendances multiples de penser l'image qui ont surgi durant les dernières décennies ? Aux initiatives poststructuralistes, au "tournant iconique" annoncé par Mitchell, à autre chose ?¹

Bruno Latour, non sans raison, souligne l'importance des faits matériels, parfois minuscules, qui ont contribué à une évolution profonde des sociétés.² Il est vrai que les idées abstraites, les écrits philosophiques n'existent que par les dispositifs techniques et institutionnels qui aident à les rendre visibles et les multiplier. A ce titre, l'invention du petit transistor, en 1947 – il y a plus de soixante ans – fut remarquable, donnant l'élan à l'invention des outils informatiques qui allaient bouleverser nos relations au temps, à l'espace, et jusqu'au commerce entre les hommes. L'histoire des images, notre manière élégante de les ignorer ou de les placer au premier

¹ Michaela Fiserova a formulé les questions.

² Voir par exemple : Bruno Latour (2001).